DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 630 CS 012 029

AUTHOR Winchock, J. M.
TITLE Sexist Attitudes towards Reading and Writing in the Young Adult and Adult Learner Population.
PUB DATE May 95
NOTE 37p.; M.A. Project, Kean College of New Jersey.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Dissertations/Theses - Undetermined (040)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Attitude Measures; Community Colleges; High Schools; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Research; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role; Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; *Writing Attitudes; Writing Research

ABSTRACT

A study examined the masculinity/femininity attitude of students toward reading and writing. Subjects, 91 young adults and adults in high school, adult high school, and community college remedial classes in the fall and spring of the 1994-1995 school year, completed the Mazurkiewicz Masculine Feminine Attitude Survey. Results indicated no significant difference between attitudes of the gender subsamples, but a significant and pronounced classification by both genders of reading and writing as mostly feminine activities. (Contains 35 references and 5 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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ED 379 630

Sexist attitudes towards reading and writing in the young adult and adult learner population

by

J. M. Winchock

Accepted
3/27/95

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts
Kean College of New Jersey
May, 1995

CS012027

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my parents, John and Marie Winchock, without who's love and support none of this would have possible. And to my daughter, Victoria Maeve Winchock, who helped me keep my sense of humor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz, Chairperson of the Department of Communication Sciences at Kean College of New Jersey, for his guidance in this project. Thank you to Ms. Diana Sefchik, At-Risk Supervisor at North Plainfield High School, Ms. Terry Luxenberg, North Plainfield Adult High School Principal, and Ms. Barbara Bretcko, English Professor at Raritan Valley Community College,for their encouragement in this project and for allowing me to survey their students.

ABSTRACT

This was a study of 91 young adults and adults in high school, adult high school, and community college remedial classes in the fall and spring of the 1994-1995 school year. A survey was taken to to determine the masculinity/feminity attitude of such students toward reading and writing. Analysis of the data indicates no significant difference between attitudes of the gender subsamples in the study, but a significant and pronounced classification by both genders of reading and writing as mostly feminine activities.

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Among educators, there seems to be a collective opinion that girls read better than boys. In American study by Dykstra and Tinney (1969), the authors stated, "This study yielded further support to the mass of evidence which demonstrates that girls have more advanced visual and auditory discrimination abilities at the readiness stage and are superior in reading ability, spelling ability, conventions of language (usage and punctuation) and arithmetic computation through the second grade." Bentzen (1966) states, "At age six when a boy enters first grade, he may be twelve months behind his female counterpart in development age, and by (age) nine this discrepancy has increased to eighteen months. Thus he is working side by side with a female who may not only be bigger than he, but who seems better prepared to handle school more competently and more comfortably."

In 1960 Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz, then Director of the Reading and Study Clinic at Lehigh University, published the results of his study on social-cultural influences on a person's attitude about reading. The majority of both the fathers and the sons surveyed in this study viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity. This attitude may be one of the reasons that there are four times the amount of boys in remedial reading classes as girls.

On the other hand, in England, Morris' (1966) study showed no significant differences in the reading achievement of the sexes. Preston (1962) found German boys to be superior in reading achievement, along with Nigerian children studied by Abiri (1969)

and Indian children studied by Oommen (1973). This world-wide comparison seems to undermine the idea that females are developmentally more ready for reading than boys.

After careful study of the various theories of sex differences in reading, Dwyer (1973) broke down four explanations as to why boys and girls generally differ in reading performance to one reason: "cultural expectations for the male sex role." Downing and Thomson (1977) and many others have come to this same conclusion.

Numerous studies have been made on the quantity of books read by children and young adults. A recent study by Whittemore (1992) has shown that in her survey population, girls were much more likely to read at least one book per month than boys. It is generally accepted that the more a student reads outside of the classroom, the better their reading skills will be (Rothman, 1990). However, a studies conducted by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988), fifth graders read an average of sixteen minutes or less per day at home in contrast with their 180 minutes in front of the television (Shearer, 1990)

A growing disinterest in reading, especially in males, has been blamed on school districts. Carsen (1980) stated, "schools thrust overly mature literature (the classics) on senior high school students and succeed only in building antagonism towards all books." Osmont (1987) believes that the male population is lost to reader at an even earlier date. In a recent London survey, female grammar school students showed greater achievement in reading

than male students. Osmont believes the problem stems from the "standard" reading material found in the classroom which she feels is more geared towards girls than boys. To battle this disinterest in reading, Osmont suggests bringing "Transformer" books, or books containing other popular cartoon/movie characters geared towards the males, into school.

To explore the reading habits of older readers, Stronks (1982) administered the Adult Inventory of Reading Interests and Attitudes (AIRIA) to 120 readers between 60 and 64 years of age. Of this group, fifty five subjects were interviewed. Those subjects classified as avid and moderate readers stated the benefits of reading to their mental well being. The female subjects of the study also stated that their social roles appeared to dictate their reading choices. Those subjects classified as minimal and moderate readers stated that work was much more important than reading and yearned for their childhood years when there was more time to devote to reading. Minimal readers in the study would like schools to not only teach reading to youngsters but to also instill in them a love of reading.

In the years since Mazurkiewicz's and Downing and Thomson's studies, we, as a society, have experienced radical change. We have been subjected to the sexual revolution, the women's rights movement, and the technological revolution and a blending or erasing of the barriers between the sexes is thought to have occurred. We view ourselves as an enlightened society. Surely no one in this enlighten society would still say that reading

was a "mostly feminine" activity or that "real boys" don't read. Or would they? There has always been a dominant male presence in remedial reading classes.

Hypothesis:

It was the hypothesis of this study that there would be no significant difference in the young learners' or adult learners' attitude towards reading and that both populations would view reading as a feminine activity, just as they did in the 1960s. It was further hypothosized that such learners would identify writing as a mostly feminine activity and that there would be no significant difference between the genders in their attitudes.

Sample:

Three segments of the high school and adult learner population were polled. Each of these segments has in common the remedial nature of the instruction taking place. All three learning institutions are located in Somerset County, New Jersey. Somerset County, as reported in the 1990 US Census, has a population of 240,279: 6% Black, 4% Hispanic origin, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 88% White. The groups surveyed roughly mirror these figures. Median household income in Somerset County is approximately $55,500 and 2.5% of the population, at the time of the census, was living below poverty level.

Procedures:

The Mazurkiewicz Masculine Feminine Attitude Survey (1960) was used in its original form, with a forced choice of "mostly masculine" or "mostly feminine" as the two responses. Unlike Marcus (1972) and Stone (1975), this author felt that the forced choice would provided the subjects' true attitude. Downing and Thomson (1977) stated, "the forced-choice technique taps attitudes which are just below the level of consciousness, attitudes which the subject may be reluctant to admit openly for fear of seeming foolish to others." If the third choice of M/F was used in the inventory, it was thought that the subjects would choose what they felt was "politically correct" and not what they viewed as true.

The Mazurkiewicz Masculine-Feminine Attitude Survey (1960) was distributed to students in various basic skills reading classes at North Plainfield High School (students in grades 9 - 12), North Plainfield Adult High School, and Raritan Valley Community College. All three institutions are located in Somerset County, New Jersey, and draw students from the same socioeconomic background. There is a large minority and English as a second language population in the area.

A total of 91 surveys were completed. The surveys collected were then reviewed, tabulated, and evaluated without bias by the author of the study.

A comparison was made of the results of this study with the results of earlier studies on the reading attitudes of young learners by Mazurkiewicz (1960) and others.

Results:

In total, 91 surveys were completed by all three groups. Forty five males and forty six female students participated. As can be seen in Table I, the majority, 92.3%, of both female and male

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TABLE I

Numbers and percentages of all male and female students in survey who thought reading to be a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity.

	Mostly Masculine		Mostly Feminine	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Males (45)	4	8.9	41	91.1
Females (46)	3	6.5	43	93.5
Total (91)	3	7.7	84	92.3

---

students responded that reading was a mostly feminine activity, 91.1% of the males choosing this response and 93.5% of the females. A chi square of .18 was computed and shows that there was no significant difference tween the gender's responses.

A breakdown of the total sample into its compound parts was done to analyze differences. Of the total of 91 subjects, a group of 38 students in grades ten through twelve were surveyed at North Plainfield High School. All of these students are placed in a Basic Skills Reading course due to their low or marginal scores

on the New Jersey High School Placement Test (NJHSPT), a state graduation requirement which measures basic skills. Of this group, 66% of the students were male and 34% were female. According to the survey responses as shown in Table II, both male

TABLE II

Numbers and percentages of male and female North Plainfield High School students who thought reading to be a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity.

	Mostly Masculine		Mostly Feminine	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Males (23)	2	8.0	23	92.0
Females (13)	1	7.7	12	92.3
Total (38)	3	7.9	35	92.1

and female students view reading as a mostly feminine activity. There is very little difference between the male and female responses in regard to the reading question.

When comparing these results of this study with those from the Mazurkiewicz (1960) study, a marked difference is found. The population in the Mazurkiewicz study was an all male group of eleventh grade students, at least sixteen years old and therefore most closely matches this segment of this study's target population. In the Mazurkiewicz study, 19% of the males surveyed classified reading as a mostly masculine activity , more than twice

that in this study, while 81% classified reading as a mostly feminine activity in comparison with the 92% in this section of this study.

At North Plainfield Adult High School, twenty one students, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty nine, were surveyed. These students are enrolled in a high school level reading/writing course in preparation of the NJHSPT. Of the survey population, 62% was female and 38% was male. Again, according to the survey responses as shown in Table III, the majority of both male and

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TABLE III

Numbers and percentages of male and female North Plainfield Adult High School students who thought reading to be a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity.

	Mostly Masculine		Mostly Feminine	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Males (8)	0	0	8	100.0
Females (13)	1	7.7	12	92.3
Total (21)	1	5.0	20	95.0

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female students view reading as a mostly feminine activity. In this case, the male population was unanimous in its decision.

Table IV shows data related to the third population

TABLE IV

Numbers and percentages of male and female Raritan Valley Community College students who thought reading to be a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity.

	Mostly Masculine		Mostly Feminine	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Males (12)	2	16.6	10	83.3
Females (20)	1	5.0	19	95.0
Total (38)	3	9.4	29	90.6

surveyed. This sample consisted of thirty two students at Raritan Valley Community College. These students had all been placed in a non-credit remedial reading class due to their scores on the New Jersey College Basic Skills Test. Females comprise 62.5 percent of those surveyed, males 37.5 percent. Again, the majority of both male and female students view reading as a mostly feminine activity, although not by the large percentage shown in the other populations.

This survey also asked participants to classify writing as either a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity. Again, the response by both the males and females surveyed as shown in Table V state that the majority, 75.6%, believe that writing is a

TABLE V

Numbers and percentages of male and female students surveyed who thought writing to be a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity.

	Mostly Masculine		Mostly Feminine	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Males (45)	12	26.7	33	73.3
Females (45)*	10	22.2	35	77.8
Total (90)	22	24.4	68	75.6

*one female who completed the survey for reading did not make a selection for writing.

mostly feminine activity.

Most of the male students at the high school level were placed in the remedial classes due to their reading scores on the NJHSPT, not their writing scores. The 4.5 difference between the samples' responses may be a reflection of this, but this difference is not statiscally significant.

Conclusions and Implications

In all populations surveyed, high school, adult high school, and community college, the majority of both male and female students view reading and writing as a mostly feminine activity. The reason, or reasons, for this attitude has not been explored in

this study. But the implications for instruction of the remedial male population is clear. Male students must be encouraged to view reading as a masculine activity if they are to succeed in pursuing reading and writing activities, develop skills, and utilize these successfully.

Sexist attitudes towards reading and writing in the young adult and adult learner population: Related Research

Mazurkiewicz (1960) hypothesized that males viewed reading as a predominately female activity. To conduct his study, Mazurkiewicz compiled a list of forty one activities for the participants to classify as mostly feminine or mostly masculine activities. To test the survey and his initial hypothesis, Mazurkiewicz surveyed Lehigh University faculty and developmental reading class students. Results from both groups confirmed Mazurkiewicz's hypothesis that males viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity. In fact most of those surveyed, males and females, viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity.

Mazurkiewicz next conducted his study with eleventh grade male students and their fathers. One hundred and fifty seven father/son pairs participated. In this study nearly 81% of the students viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity, while 72% of the fathers held the same view. Because of this difference, it was surmised that the father's attitude toward reading did not have a significant impact (approximately 7%) on the son if the son was enrolled in an academic program. However, if the student was enrolled in a vocational program, a higher amount of influence was shown between father and son. Mazurkiewicz estimated that 21% of the male vocational student's attitude could be traced back to the father.

Mazurkiewicz also found a minor relationship between the males student's ability to read and the classification of reading as a mostly feminine activity. Those male students who viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity tended to have poorer

reading skills than the males who classified reading as a masculine activity. Mazurkiewicz therefore concluded that only 2% to 5% of the male student's reading ability can be traced back to a sexist view of reading.

In Marcus' (1972) study of reading attitudes, none of the vocational students' fathers surveyed viewed reading as a masculine activity. Marcus received 30 paired (father/son) responses to the Masculine-Feminine Attitude Inventory form eleventh grade students. Almost 63% of these father's viewed reading as a feminine activity. But Marcus allowed students a third role choice (M-F) when completing the inventory, a choice that had been discarded by Mazurkiewicz in the preliminary stages of his study. This choice expanded the allowed student responses to be: ***M***, mostly masculine; ***F***, mostly feminine; or ***M/F***, no choice, or distinction of sex. Thirty seven percent of the vocational students' fathers made this choice along with about 59% of the academic males and 50% of the the vocational males. The curriculum of the students, vocational or academic, did not seem to influence the students' attitudes in this survey.

Adult readers were surveyed by Sharon (1974) in order to discover how reading fits into adult lives. It was found that the typical adult spends about two hours reading print material, be it street signs or books. Sharon surmised that this is why those adults with poor reading skills are doomed to the low rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Sharon's 5,067 member sample was selected from a cross-section of the country. Females made up

57.9% of the sample population and the population was predominately white (88%). Most (49%) had a ninth - twelfth grade education. Sharon states in his study that males read more than females (113 minutes vs 110 minutes) because males are more often employed in careers that require heavy reading. A breakdown is not given in the report, however, of male and female responses to recreational reading. Sharon states that young adults are also thought to read more than older adults and low income individuals read less than high income individuals.

A three phase test or survey was conducted by Downing and Thomson (1977) which involved 743 subjects in Victoria, Canada. First, 137 second year education students at the University of Victoria were asked to view slides of "stick children" performing different duties and then to assign a sex to that child. Second, the same slides were shown to 90 first graders, 122 fourth graders, 104 eighth graders, and 110 twelfth graders in the city school district located near the university. These subjects were also asked to state if the stick figure was a girl or a boy. Third, a similar test, using a booklet of the pictures instead of slides, was given to 180 adults from Victoria. The adults were interviewed in their homes and in private by an interviewer trained by Downing and Thomson. Overall, 410 females and 333 males participated in the study. In every group of subjects, except for the first grade (the youngest), there was a significantly higher response of "girl" for the stick figure reading than the response for "boy." Downing and Thomson hypothesize that "cultural

expectations in this North American community involve the perception of the reading activity as being more suited for young females than for young males."

Unlike Sharon, Scales and Biggs (1987) found that older adults read more than young adults. Two interesting statistics from this study: 1) 93.5% of the females surveyed said they could read advertisements without difficulty compared to only 64.7% of the males, and 2) 70.6% of the males responded that they skipped words while reading compared to 40% of the females. One sad statistic is that of those adults who read, 59% responded that their families and friends were not interested in hearing what they read about.

Stone (1975) conducted a study similar to Marcus (1972) of 133 eleventh grade students. Stone collected student scores from the SRA Assessment Survey Skills Profile and administered Mazurkiewicz's (1960) Masculine-Feminine Attitude Inventory. Stone also included in the MFAI the M/F choice. Of the students enrolled in an academic curriculum, approximately 49% of the males and approximately 48% of the females stated that reading is a feminine activity, and approximately 9% of the males and approximately 8% of the females viewed reading as a masculine activity. But students in the non-academic classes held a different attitude towards reading. Only 4% of the males viewed reading as masculine, whereas 44% viewed reading as a feminine activity. Approximately 12% of these females viewed reading as a masculine activity and approximately 59% as a female activity.

Stone therefore postulates that a student's attitude towards reading might be shaped by his/her reading ability when compared to the median population ability. In other words, if the boys don't read well, they may think it is because reading is a "girl thing."

Bartone (1976) also surveyed a group of parents and their children to determine if parental attitude of reading as a sexist act influenced a child's reading achievement level. Although their children did not follow suit, 66% of the fathers surveyed viewed reading as a feminine activity while only 36% saw it as a masculine activity. Twenty seven percent of the mothers surveyed viewed reading as a masculine activity and 72% as a feminine activity. Their daughters, however, responded to masculine 51% of the time and feminine 48% of the time, demonstrating that the parents' views had not yet influenced their children.

Levison (1976) studied the correlation between a student's socioeconomic status and the student's attitude towards reading. An attitude inventory questionnaire was distributed to 108 eight grade students for this study. It is interesting to note that the study found no significant difference in reading attitudes in the female students in regard to their socioeconomic or academic status. The same, however, can not be said for the male students surveyed. Both high and moderate level academic male students displayed a moderate relationship between their socioeconomic status and their attitudes towards reading. Low level academic male students displayed a high relationship between their

socioeconomic status and their poor attitudes towards reading. Levison surmises that this may be a result of parental motivation/attitudes towards reading.

Sixty slides were shown by Kelly (1986) to 492 suburban students, 255 females and 237 males. These students were in either Kindergarten, second, fourth, sixth, eight, or high school grades. Only the hands of people were shown in the slides while they performed various activities. There was never enough of the subject's body shown the identify the sex of the person in the slides. The students were asked " whether the child doing each activity was more likely to be a ten year old girl or boy." Kindergarten students showed no significant variations in their responses. The students in grades two through high school, however, generally identified the person performing general reading, poetry reading, or dictionary reading as being female. The person shown reading a mystery book, TV Guide, the newspaper comics, a science book, and an animal book were most often identified as a boy. Kelly therefore concludes that at the beginning of school, reading attitudes are most likely neutral and change as children mature and interact.

Smith (1988) continued a longitudinal study performed by Kritlow (1962, 1969). Smith located 409 of Kritlow's subjects, of which eighty four agreed to complete the Adult Survey of Reading Attitudes (ASRA). Smith found little change in the reading attitudes of his subjects during their school years. Also, the adults with the most education had the highest positive attitude towards

reading. Smith suggests that positive attitudes towards reading are carried on to adulthood.

White (1989) also found a direct correlation between a reader's attitude about reading and a reader's level of performance. Of the 876 grade 1 - 8 students studied by White, females had the best attitude towards reading overall, but there was no significant difference in male and female performance. The male students tended to have good attitudes towards reading until reaching grades seven and eight where it dropped drastically.

Edwards (1989) surveyed 100 grammar school students in grades one through five. Most males in this survey in grades one through four viewed reading as a feminine activity. However, most males in grade five viewed reading as a mostly masculine activity, suggesting male attitudes towards reading may change with maturity. Female students at all grade levels viewed reading as a feminine activity.

Suhorsky and Nuzzi (1989) administered a reading attitude survey to middle school children to determine there were any difference between the reading attitudes of female and male students. Two hundred seventy two sixth, seventh, and eight grade students were surveyed. Shorsky and Nuzzi discovered that, in their survey population, both male and female students liked to discuss stories prior to reading and oral reading. Female students ranked teacher encouraged questions, writing out answers, and completing worksheets as more helpful/enjoyable

than the male students. However, when the group was tested in a pretest for the state mandated functional reading test that is a graduation requirement, no score difference for the sexes was found. Therefore, although Suhorsky's and Nuzzi's survey results showed that the female students had a more positive attitude towards reading and reading related tasks, the performance between the male and female students in a standardized test was not effected by this attitude.

Nelson (1989) administered the Reading Interest Survey to 189 of his former students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. From those students surveyed, female students showed a higher interest in reading than their male counterparts, had a better attitude toward reading than the male students, and realized the importance of family members modeling good reading behavior much more than the males surveyed. From this information, Nelson made many suggestions for instruction, including the need for instructors to be good reading models and the need for parents to be good reading models -- both male and female.

In activities and objects related to literacy skills, significant sex differences in reading attitudes was found in Shapiro's (1990) study of children from kindergarten through second grade. At the end of their kindergarten year, almost half of the males and females viewed reading as a sex appropriate activity. In the spring of grade one, males began to view reading as a feminine rather than masculine activity. This view increased as they went on

through grade two. The females students, however, developed a stronger attitude that reading was a feminine activity.

To determine reading interests in high school students, Whittemore (1992) surveyed 450 North Ridgefield High School students. Of those who responded, 55% of the female students claimed to read one or more books a month, while only 30.6% of the male students made the same claim. The majority of male students responded that they read one or more books a year. Only 6% of the students said they had never read a book: 19 males and 8 females. Whittemore concluded that, on average, female students read more than males.

Corlett (1992) hypothesized that no statistically significant difference in learning style elements would be found between males and females. Eighty three underachieving students, forty four boys and thirty nine girls, participated in Corlett's study. The Marie Carbo Reading/Learning Inventory was administered to this students in order to analyze learning style elements such as "physical-perceptual elements, emotional-persistence, responsibility, motivation, and the sociological factors of work choice." Many students received the test orally because of their low reading ability. Corlett's hypothesis was found to be correct with the test group. The only area of significant difference was found in the responses to group work. Male students were much more apt to want to work alone (55%) than female students (33%).

Cloer and Pearman (1992) studied 280 students and 18 teachers to find relationships between attitudes about academic

and recreational reading. They found a significant drop in positive male attitudes towards both academic and recreational reading when comparing students in grades 1 - 3 and grades 4 - 6. There was also a drop in positive female attitudes towards only academic reading in this same comparison.

Thames (1992) conducted a study of the benefits of individualized language arts instruction integrated into the classroom. A total of sixty students were involved, thirty three in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. Those students in the experimental group were given reading instruction which incorporated listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities twice a week or a period of twelve weeks. The Student Attitude Inventory was used as a pre- and post-test. At the end, the students in the experimental group had a significantly higher positive attitude towards reading. Females in both groups had a more positive attitude towards reading the the males in their respective groups.

O'Sullivan (1992) conducted a study of reading attitudes in students from low income families. More female students at all grade levels rated reading as easier, useful, pleasurable, and interesting than the male students. The female students also had higher expectations for themselves now and in the future. But, the male and females students had a equal view over their control of the reading process and their ability to improve their reading performance. Although both sexes saw reading as being viewed as important by their teacher, the female students graded its

importance to their parents higher than the male students did. Most of the parent surveyed also thought their daughters were better readers than their sons and stated that reading was easier, more interesting, and more pleasurable for their daughters. The parents also hold higher expectations in reading for their daughters than they do for their sons.

Stone and Wu (1993) surveyed ninety four freshman/ sophomore students in an introduction to mass media course at Memphis State University and ninety seven sophomore students in a survey class at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. They found support for their hypothesis that, as adolescents, females would report reading more books for pleasure than males. Stone and Wu also found two distinct types of adolescent behaviors: "those who read versus those who go to the mall, talk on the phone and listen to the radio." Also, those students who preferred to play sports as adolescents were less likely to be readers, mall walkers, television addicts, or telephone users. But those students who started using print media early in life did continue with the habit. Stone and Wu also found that with their test subjects gender difference faded with age. By age 20, both males and females reported equal reading habits.

Fronius (1993) surveyed young adults involved in the Medina County District Library summer reading program. Of the 538 forms completed by the readers, 82% were completed by young females and 18% by males, suggesting a marked preference by females for reading as a leisure activity. Most of the

youngsters involved in the program were in the seventh and eighth grades. Participation from students in the higher grades decreased significantly, with only .7% of the senior classes involved in the program. Fronius suggests two reasons for this decline: 1) a growing interest in diverse activities as youngsters mature, and 2) growing disinterest in reading caused by dislike, as stated by Carlsen (1980), of assigned reading in the upper grades.

No association between gender and attitudes in reading was found by Rains (1993) in a study of forty five Western Kansas grammar school students, grades one through six. Attitudes towards recreational and academic reading were obtained through the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS). Of the eighteen comparisons made only three showed significant deviations. Positive attitudes in reading were much stronger in students who were involved in a reading program over those who were not, student in a higher socioeconomic level over those in lower levels, and students in grades one through four showed a significantly higher positive reading attitude than the students in grades five and six.

The majority of these studies found a significant difference in attitudes towards reading between male and female children, adolescents, and adults. Very little information could be found on what to do about the problem and even if this can be considered a problem. As an instructor of reading spending my days with young adults and adults, I see this male attitude to be a very large problem. Further research must be done to supply instructors with

usable information with which to battle this attitude.

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